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Entitled to understand

Nugteren, A.

Published in:
Interreligious hermeneutics in pluralistic Europe

Publication date:
2011

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Nugteren, A. (2011). Entitled to understand: A critical look at comparative theology. In D. Cheetham, U. Winkler, O. Leirvik, & J. Gruber (Eds.), *Interreligious hermeneutics in pluralistic Europe: Between texts and people* (pp. 149-160). (Currents of Encounter; No. 40). Editions Rodopi.

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Entitled to Understand

A Critical Look at Comparative Theology

Albertina Nugteren

Comparison as a Third Space

This essay grew out of the invitation to respond to Francis Clooney's presentation of his version of comparative theology, and rephrases, in a modest way, what Alasdair MacIntyre pointed to when he asked if understanding religion is compatible with believing in it (MacIntyre 1964, quoted in Wiebe 2005: 260ff.), a question that Donald Wiebe took to mean: Does understanding religion require religious understanding (Wiebe 2005: 260)? I will not touch on any of the problems related to the question if theology is more or less valid than religious studies. What Clooney's work triggers in me is, apart from a deep admiration for the depth and breadth of his knowledge of at least two religious traditions, the challenge to reflect on who is best equipped to compare and who is entitled to understand. At this point I must introduce myself as a relative outsider: I am not a theologian but an Indologist and a religious studies specialist. The reason I was requested to respond to Clooney's presentation of comparative theology may be that we do have one thing in common: the study of Indian religions.

Francis Clooney's work in comparative theology is executed patiently, painstakingly, and with integrity.¹ It creates a self-consciously composed locus of encounter in which a specific type of interreligious dialogue occurs. Ideally, in his view, the comparative theologian leaves behind the relative innocence of knowing only one tradition deeply, i.e. his/her own, with merely fragmentary and often dismissive knowledge of other traditions. To him, the ideal comparativist is uniquely

¹ I consulted various of his books published since the 1990s, especially his introductory chapters to Clooney 1993, 1996, 2008, as well as some articles, such as Clooney 1997, 2002, 2007.

positioned for a kind of intellectual and spiritual learning that would not be possible for one who knows only one of them. Clooney himself focuses on textual materials from specific corners of Christianity, particularly its mystic traditions emphasising devotional surrender, and specific devotional theology within Hinduism, especially that of the south Indian Srivaishnava schools. In his extremely careful approach, with meticulous attention to scriptural detail, often engaging various commentaries on a single phrase, he gives ample room for the “foreign” text to speak in all its layeredness, both in its own words and in the commentarial traditions. After having thoroughly studied such a text, he relies on his instincts (often triggered by associative thinking) to bring in a fitting second text from his own tradition with which he starts the comparison. In this way he produces transgressive learning, both academically and spiritually. What Clooney suggests is a theology that occurs only *after* a particular comparative encounter has taken place, in the shape of a comparison that has been executed fairly and meticulously. The result is a delicately balanced interior dialogue from the pen of a single author. A definitive analysis and interpretation is not offered, let alone a grand statement essentialising the two traditions.

He thus proposes a theology that is produced from the unique position that accompanies comparative study: it brings a refined understanding of both texts and, as such, a new light to both traditions. This more intense way of learning and understanding, in his view, goes beyond many well-intended but often necessarily lopsided encounters and comparisons. The enterprise of comparative theology, in this North American version, thus emerges as the dialectical and dialogical activity of closely reading and rereading texts, i.e. particular texts from Hindu theologians like Vedantadeshika, together with texts from Catholic mystics like Francis de Sales, Satakopan’s *Tiruvaymoli* paired with Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermons on the Song of Songs, or Patañjali’s *Yogasutras* with excerpts from the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola. This reading, rereading, and comparing takes place on the new stage formed by the meeting of two discrete, distinct, and until now separate traditions, a stage where a contemporary North American theologian is instrumental in making two voices heard: that of, for in-

stance, a south Indian theologian-cum-mystic who lived and worked several centuries ago and that of a mystically inclined father of the Church who likewise evokes the reader to lose oneself in loving surrender to God.

It is clear that this more intense way of reading, learning, and understanding demands high erudition, not least of all a proficiency in languages, and a both scholarly and spiritual sensitivity to the evocative power of texts produced long ago. Clooney focuses emphatically on textual materials and leaves to others the equally important fieldwork that is required to understand the meaning that actual living people give to religious issues and the way they shape their devotion in daily life. Comparative theology thus creates a third space and becomes a theology that is not content with comparing the two separate spaces of the texts under scrutiny but instead is willing to be, even anticipates being, transformed in the process. This makes comparative theology a theology that may be deeply changed by its attention to the details of multiple religious, theological, and spiritual traditions.

Reading through various introductions to Clooney's work in comparative theology I admire the careful, eloquent, and self-conscious way in which he treads the ground. He appears to anticipate most of the criticisms that might come his way by proceeding with a cautious yet stubborn conviction. Despite this cautious attitude, he obviously believes in his course, a course determined by the comparative dynamic of reading across the borders of two spiritual traditions and thus creating a third space in which at the very least his own Christian theology is expected to be deeply transformed by the experience of the encounter.

Verstehen/Understanding as Faith-Based?

It is exactly this extremely careful approach, with meticulous attention to scriptural details, that may well be able to win me over. Yet this entire exercise of comparative theology is outspokenly faith-grounded. According to Clooney, a comparative theologian should have his/her roots in some particular religious tradition, and have a commitment and engagement to it. The terms "we," "us," "ours," and "our own" abound. Who is addressed and included here? Who feels self-evidently and nat-

urally enclosed by these references? I must admit I do not. Even more so, I feel excluded from the entire exercise precisely on this ground.

This easily and naturally supposed faith as a criterion, as a precondition, strikes me as questionable. Is meticulous scholarship not enough, along with empathy, integrity, sensitivity, apart from language skills and philological endurance? Why would a scholar of religion need to belong to a faith? Would it not then rightfully be called theology otherwise? Or, to return to the third space I mentioned above, the platform on which the supposed intellectual, theological, and spiritual transformation can take place: Is anyone who does not belong to either tradition—or any religious tradition, for that matter—denied entrance?

For the well-trained comparativist, cautiously moving forward, examining details rather than entire religious systems, what would be the advantage of belonging to a particular tradition, preferably to one of the two being compared? Are scholars who do not belong to a tradition – since there are many religious studies specialists today who write highly sensitive and insightful works on particular details of one or more religious traditions located elsewhere in the world – not equally equipped to produce what Clooney's comparative theology is aiming for? Would one need to be a theologian, a "belonger" (Davie 1994) and a believer as well to be able to compare fruitfully, creatively, and be willing to be transformed in the process, transcending both traditions by entering a new space, the third space of deeper, maybe even shared, meanings and messages?

In Clooney's hands, comparative theology is distinguished by attentiveness to the dynamics of theological and spiritual learning, deepened and made complex through the close study of two traditions, one of which is other than one's own. The first requirement for this experiment in comparative theology would be historical, cultural, and linguistic expertise in (at least) two traditions. The second requirement is that such a researcher (Clooney calls him "reader," with a staggering downplay of the painstaking philological groundwork required for a fair encounter of texts) would be persistent in the interrogation of the ideas presented in the two texts. The third requirement

would be openness to the full force of such a “foreign” text, allowing a change of perspective that may even prove to be radical. The fourth requirement would be that such an encounter would not remain limited to the private sphere of the solitary reader or even the selected company of experts, but would benefit a much wider audience (Clooney 2008: 2).

What is at stake here, in my view, is the question how legitimate it would be to be transformed in the process and still remain loyal to “one’s own tradition.” Considering Clooney’s background as a Jesuit priest, I could well imagine that the possible – or even probable – transformation in that third space requires an anticipatory defence, justification, or legitimation. Considering Clooney’s credentials as a Harvard scholar, the shift from the status of mere observer to that of a spiritually persuaded practitioner may also need some apologetics. Furthermore, considering Clooney’s association with Srivaisnava scholars in southern India, in the light of nationalistic fervour, his close engagement with “their” Vedantadeshika may well raise anti-colonial and anti-Christian suspicions.²

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The only way I can attempt to access this endeavour of comparative theology critically is through the alleged spiritual transfiguration to which Clooney himself points. Naturally, for academia, by offering a (new) translation with fair attention to the various commentaries, Clooney’s disclosure of a relatively unknown Hindu text would be sufficient justification for his efforts. His philological efforts are justified doubly by bringing in a comparable text from “his own” tradition. But Clooney still obviously wants more. This entire enterprise of entering a third space beyond both texts may be productive, creative, and stimulating in the hands of a person like him, with the safeguard of both an impressive scholarly record and a delicate even elo-

² As on various websites, added as readers’ reviews on publishers’ and booksellers’ pages.

³ This phrase is a variation on the title of an expert seminar “Entitled to Surrender,” organised by Norbert Hintersteiner around Francis Clooney’s work, 5 July 2006, at Utrecht University.

quent anticipation of whatever critique may come his way. In other hands, however, such an enterprise may slide into the same old pitfalls to which past comparative endeavours were prone.

What could be the pitfall if comparative theology becomes, for instance, a comparative (study of) spirituality? The revelatory and evocative character of *Verstehen* so far transcends the job description of the academic student of religion.⁴ Clooney admits to a significant change in his own Christian theology through an endeavour, comparative theology, that is explicitly faith-grounded. Applying Grace Davie's useful distinction between belonging and believing to the persistence of a form of belief (or spirituality in its present connotation) in many situations in which rather dramatically declining "belonging" can be found, as is the case in western Europe today, would a comparative spirituality be both more accessible and fool-proof than comparative theology in hands other than Clooney's? He speaks of transgressive learning: Does this point to what I indicated as that newly created third space of comparative theology? In that case, would comparative spirituality be able to speak of transgressive learning too, albeit not in the sense of a *newly created* third space but in that of a *newly accessed* third space, a space that is supposed to exist beyond all distinctions, paradoxes, and otherness, a space that does not need to be created but is always, perennially there, ready to be accessed by the advancing spiritual adept. Comparative spirituality, then, may also be a process of transgressive learning requiring a faith: not belonging necessarily, but believing. As such, it would not matter much whether the exercise is called comparative theology or comparative spirituality.

Anyone who speaks of something surpassing distinct categories, discrete theological systems, enclosed "we" communities of peer believers, and especially the safe boundaries of the ecclesiastical or scholarly status quo will be the recipient of

⁴ Please note that I am the one who is introducing the contested notion of *Verstehen*, not Clooney. For an attempt to bridge the gap between the two approaches of explanation and understanding by applying the hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur see Kepnes 1986.

disdain, scepticism, and critique from various corners as well as cheers, admiration, and even adoration from other corners. The reading of ancient texts in a novel way is bound to draw comments, raise suspicions, and be experienced as intrusive by both sides, particularly when it is called deep learning, and a first-person participatory perspective and "post-objective" empathy are required. At the same time, when considered from the angle of interreligious dialogue, it may be seen as an intelligent response to today's pluralistic life-world in which religions no longer stand alone. Although Clooney clearly leaves the study of actual encounter in daily life to others, by reading beyond boundaries he draws his readers along with him into a transformative process, making a particular contribution to interreligious understanding. *Verstehen*, then, in the last analysis, is religious in nature (Waardenburg 1978: 228).

Clooney's comparative theology, often far removed from the more immediate arena of actual interreligious dialogue in practice, distinguishes itself by two features: its empirical method and its resistance to generalisations about particular religions (Nicholson 2009: 620). Still, along with theology of religions it has more or less a common genealogy in the comparative method of the late nineteenth century. It advertises itself as a non-hegemonic form of interreligious theological discourse, patiently deferring issues of truth, but the problem of theological hegemonism, although muted by adopting an empirical method and refraining from excessive generalisation, is still apparent (Nicholson 2009: 620). Avoiding a totalising perspective by emphasising the local and particular, it challenges the discreteness and otherness of the various theologically defined religious traditions in the world, in Clooney's case, the conceptual constructions like "Hinduism" and "Christianity." Religious boundaries may thus be deconstructed, not as non-existent but rather as fluid and porous.

Comparative theology also rides the tide of globalisation. It remains to be seen if there will be only one kind of winner in the global marketplace of the future: either the extremely particular and bounded, providing a cocooned kind of religious belonging, or an extremely free trade in which belonging is only momentous and collated, not a lifelong choice and commitment. There may well be many winners simultaneously, cater-

ing to the manifold and variegated needs. And as long as needs are diverse, there will be many stalls and shops in the market. The Hegelian synthesis (a third space in itself!) that many seek today is readily provided by “mindstyle” magazines, spiritual books, inspirational courses, and feel-good programmes. Globalisation, commodification, and commercialisation, however, create the illusion of an endless variety on offer, where, on closer scrutiny, the goods are remarkably alike, as are the religious goods that are being offered. Erasing national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, in addition to many obvious advantages, also has the by-effect that things soon begin to look rather plain, flat, and interchangeable. Erasing religious boundaries by a vague kind of spirituality or well-intentioned universalism may have produced a wider sense of self in the last century, but it remains to be seen if there is much “deep learning across religious boundaries” as Clooney advocates.⁵ Deep learning requires a tremendous effort and heavy sacrifices, commitment to an ideal that may be driven by a spiritual, mystical, philosophical, ecological, or even economic inspiration of inter-being, but one has to start at home, and in that sense I readily admit that Clooney has a point by starting from his own rich Catholic tradition and his Jesuit heritage.

Comparative theology in Clooney’s hands breaks through conventional boundaries by a well thought out juxtaposing of particular texts, but even his extremely cautious approach cannot relieve me of a sense of doubt and suspicion. In colonial times, adventurous and greedy men sailed off to distant places, especially the Orient, in the search for spices with which they could preserve and season their bland food at home. Now, can the same mistake be avoided here, i.e. that of interfering thoughtlessly with far-away people and their socio-economic infrastructures in this age for the sake of adding non-Christian spices to a Christian dish that may have become too bland? In other words, aligning themselves with the forces of globalisation, the “we” that Clooney so self-evidently uses may well be blind to the fact that there is no power balance here. Many

⁵ See the title of his new book *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders*.

are now well aware of the blind spots in the colonial enterprise, such as blatant cultural assumptions and dramatically uneven power relations. Yet many are still guilty of being mindless consumers on today's markets.

In today's global marketplace there is an unprecedented variety of spices on offer, as well as an unprecedented variety of religious writings from all times and traditions. Even if I still feel slightly uncomfortable with Clooney's project, I acknowledge its evocative power especially in learning to read closely two texts from widely divergent traditions, texts which offer a striking family resemblance not only in selected passages extracted for easy quotations but even after disciplined and careful consideration of their overall message and meaning. If anything, Clooney teaches us to sit down and patiently immerse ourselves in two ancient texts, read them from cover to cover, and let them speak, singly as well as in interaction. Refraining from generalising statements on the two religious systems in which these two texts are embedded, in his final chapter he limits his theology to an intimate conversation between the two texts that have jointly come to life before him. At the very least this is a disciplined exercise in close reading.

Religiosity as an Added Value?

Returning to the second of my initial questions, on what might be the added value of being religious for a researcher in the study of religion, I am well aware of the romantic and subjective character of *Verstehen*, as proposed by Dilthey, and carried on by scholars such as Van der Leeuw and Söderblom (Waardenburg 1973: 53ff.). Those historians of religion who wanted to apply this "understanding" in their field felt that the rationalistic approaches of their time were not only explaining religion but were also explaining it away. The term *Verstehen* was introduced into philosophy and the human sciences in order to contrast this type of knowing with the external objectifying third-person perspective of description and explanation. Does the strenuous effort of learning to see in a new way, as indicated by Clooney's comparative theology, require a grasping that includes more than the observable part of religion? Regarding this, W.C. Smith stated that "the whole path and substance of religious life lies in its relation to what cannot be ob-

served." Wiebe, who is known as a fierce opponent to this, responds: "If Smith is right, faith cannot be known objectively and its expressions can only be properly understood from within the faith experience," thus concluding that, according to Smith, an understanding of religion is impossible without religious understanding: "a study of religion based upon that distinction, therefore, becomes a kind of religious exercise" (Wiebe 2005: 264-68, esp. 266).

Here we see that even within the critical or academic study of religion, which was, from the very beginning, intent on avoiding such a metaphysical condition, one of the great writers, W.C. Smith, took what is, in effect, a theological stance. The academic study of religion is not a rejection of the religious ideal in life but is, rather, an attempt to reflect upon that ideal. Considering Clooney's ideal, and that of many others engaged in some kind of fair interreligious encounter, I cannot help but see an intellectually and theologically justified partiality, not so much towards one's own religion or even towards a religious tradition other than one's own – both do occur, and both are biases, one of the hegemonic type, the other of the romantic type – but rather towards the religious life itself. I wonder if such a stance disqualifies the non-religious understanding of religion. As I have learned from associating with theologians for more than thirty years, it may well be that our use as religious studies specialists is still considered that of an *ancilla*, a hand-maiden to theology. The finer craft – that of an embodied experience and a spiritual transformation, allowed only *after* the meticulous reading of texts, the empirical description of a particular object of study, and the conceptual ordering have been executed according to the *métier* of the academic study of religion – still appears to be left only to insiders, to theologians, to those who "belong." The crowning exercise, that of an interior dialogue and a transformation that is both personally spiritual and theological, would ultimately justify the intellectual efforts by its utility and its capacity to inspire the participants into becoming better people with a higher sense of belonging.

If this is the case, then what may look cautious, delicate, and patient in Clooney's books may well be suspected of having an underlying motive. Genetically speaking, from the per-

spective of evolutionary biology, the persistence of religion may be due partly to its advantage for the survival of the species by individual people's surrender to a greater sense of self, be it a nuclear family, a tribe, or society, humanity, and life in general. Belief and belonging are in our genes, so to speak. But narrowing this down to the actual life-world, the global map in which ESITIS conferences, for all kinds of reasons, manage to draw mainly Western theologians, I feel pressed to voice some of my caveats, not only *from the ongoing discussion on the academic* distinction between religious understanding and understanding religion but also about the same old pitfalls to which the comparative enterprise is prone, especially in the hands of theology. One should beware of going in circles and beware of an agenda not unlike the seafaring of our colonial forebears who brought cargoes of spices home.

There is no denying that our kitchen has gained much from those forays into foreign lands. But was it fair trade? Likewise, is it fair trade when Western theologians execute a faith-based exercise in comparative theology, however spiritually uplifting?

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